Curated Selves, Fractured Society: How Digital Identity Performance Mirrors And Magnifies Social Stratification

Dr. Bishwajit Khumukcham[1], Dr. Buchi Mayanglambam[2], Dr. Ningombam Andropov Singh[3], Merina Henam[4]

[1.] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Naorem Birahari College, Manipur.
[2.] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur.
[3.] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur.
[4.] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nambol L. Sanoi College, Manipur.

Abstract
This paper argues that the pervasive cultural practice of digitally curating one's identity functions as a potent new engine of social stratification. Moving beyond the view of social media as a mere reflection of inequality, we contend it actively reproduces and deepens existing social hierarchies through three interconnected mechanisms: aesthetic labor that performs class distinction, capital conversion that monetizes identity, and psychological stratification that internalizes inequality. Employing a comparative qualitative case study design, this research analyzes influencers Sophie Shohet ("quiet luxury" aesthetic) and Brittany Broski ("relatable authenticity" aesthetic) to demonstrate how Pierre Bourdieu's forms of capital economic, cultural, and social are converted within the digital attention economy. The findings reveal a vicious cycle where aesthetic performance creates distinction that is monetized, fueling further performance and exacerbating both economic and psychological inequality. This process is insidiously masked by a neoliberal narrative of individual choice and entrepreneurialism, legitimizing these deepened fractures. The paper concludes that recognizing this dynamic is crucial for reimagining a digital public sphere that prioritizes connection over competition and solidarity over stratification.
Keywords: Social Stratification, Digital Identity, Cultural Capital, Influencer Culture, Neoliberalism, Aesthetic Labor, Digital Inequality

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital landscape, the curation of selfhood has become a ubiquitous cultural practice. Scroll through any social media feed, and one encounters a dazzling array of meticulously crafted identities from the serene "clean girl" aesthetic to the chaotic "relatable" content creator, from "cottagecore" enthusiasts to "quiet luxury" adherents. This digital panorama of the "curated self" represents what Anthony Giddens might identify as the reflexive project of the self-intensified to unprecedented degrees (Giddens). Yet, this spectacle of digital connection and self-expression coincides with a stark reality: rising rates of anxiety, profound loneliness, and deepening economic divides (American Psychological Association; Pew Research Center). This paradox forms the central problematic of this paper.

The dominant cultural narrative hails platforms like Instagram and TikTok as "great equalizers" digital stages where anyone can build a personal brand and find success through sheer creativity and effort (Marwick). This narrative of individual empowerment and democratized opportunity, however, obscures a more troubling function. This paper argues that the digital "curated self" is not merely a reflection of existing inequality but a potent new engine of social stratification. By transforming identity into a product and personal expression into unpaid "aesthetic labor," digital curation systematically rewards those who

already possess economic and cultural advantages. It legitimizes these growing inequalities under the seductive guise of individual choice and entrepreneurial spirit, thereby deepening societal fractures while promising connection.

Through a theoretical synthesis of Bourdieu's capital theory and Goffman's dramaturgy, and a comparative case study analysis of two distinct influencer types, this paper illuminates the mechanics of this process across three analytical chapters. First, it examines how aesthetic labor on digital platforms creates a class-coded system of distinction. Second, it investigates how influencers convert social and cultural capital into economic capital, creating new digital elites. Third, it analyzes the psychological toll of perpetual curation as a new axis of stratification. The paper concludes that the very tools which promise connection are paradoxically becoming the architects of division, and that recognizing this link is essential for imagining more equitable digital futures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Performed Self - From Goffman to Giddens: Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory provides a foundational framework for understanding digital identity as performance (Goffman). His distinction between "front stage" and "back stage" behavior conceptualizes social interaction as a form of impression management shaped by audience presence. In digital environments, this model acquires renewed significance. Social media platforms function as a continuous and global front stage, where individuals are persistently visible and subject to evaluation. Posts, images, captions, and interactions operate as performance elements through which users manage how they are perceived. The back stage, traditionally understood as a protected space of withdrawal and recuperation, becomes increasingly fragile, compressed, or altogether absent in platform-mediated life.

This collapse of boundaries intensifies what this paper describes as aesthetic labor. Digital self-presentation demands sustained, unpaid work involving the curation of appearance, lifestyle, emotional tone, and environment. Choices about clothing, space, language, and affect are shaped by dominant norms of visibility and desirability. What appears as casual sharing is often the result of careful calibration aimed at aligning the self with socially validated ideals. The digital front stage, unlike its offline counterpart, rarely closes. Performance becomes ongoing rather than situational, extending Goffman's insights into a condition of permanent exposure.

Anthony Giddens' concept of the self as a reflexive project further explains the historical conditions under which this intensified performance emerges (Giddens). In late modernity, traditional institutions such as family, religion, and community provide fewer stable identity frameworks. Individuals are required to construct their sense of self through continuous self-narration, reflection, and revision. Identity becomes an ongoing project rather than a fixed inheritance.

Within digital contexts, this reflexive project is no longer private or episodic. It is publicly staged, constantly updated, and subject to immediate feedback. Likes, comments, shares, and algorithmic visibility operate as mechanisms of social evaluation, shaping how the self is revised and sustained. The curated self thus represents an intensified form of reflexivity: a continuously edited autobiography performed before an indeterminate audience. Identity becomes inseparable from its reception, binding self-understanding to metrics of attention and approval.

Together, Goffman and Giddens offer a powerful lens for interpreting digital selfhood. Their frameworks reveal that online identity is neither spontaneous nor purely expressive. It is structured by visibility, feedback, and normative expectations, transforming self-presentation into a disciplined and labor-intensive practice. The performed self in digital

culture is therefore not simply enacted but produced under conditions that link identity formation to social evaluation and value extraction.

The Architecture of Inequality- Bourdieu's Capitals: Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital forms the central analytical framework of this study (Bourdieu, *Distinction*). His intervention shifts the understanding of inequality away from income alone and toward a broader system of accumulated advantages that structure social life. For Bourdieu, power operates through resources that appear natural, earned, and culturally legitimate, allowing social hierarchies to reproduce themselves without overt coercion.

Bourdieu identifies three primary forms of capital that organize social stratification. Economic capital refers to material wealth, income, and property, granting direct access to security and opportunity. Cultural capital includes education, knowledge, skills, and cultivated tastes, often expressed as confidence and familiarity with valued cultural codes. Social capital consists of networks, affiliations, and relationships that provide access to influence and recognition. These forms rarely operate in isolation. Instead, they reinforce one another through processes of accumulation and exchange.

A key insight in Bourdieu's framework is the convertibility of capital. Cultural knowledge can generate social recognition, which can then be translated into economic gain. This circulation sustains what Bourdieu describes as social reproduction, whereby existing advantages are preserved and expanded over time. Inequality persists not because resources are fixed, but because the rules governing their conversion favor those already positioned within dominant social fields.

This paper extends Bourdieu's model to the digital field, arguing that social media platforms function as intensified sites of capital conversion. The digital environment does not neutralize class structures. Instead, it introduces new mechanisms through which capital is displayed, accumulated, and monetized. Economic capital enables access to time, technology, and professional support. Cultural capital shapes aesthetic judgment, language use, and platform literacy. Social capital emerges through followers, engagement, and algorithmic visibility.

This perspective aligns with danah boyd's distinction between the digital divide and digital inequality (boyd). While access to platforms has become widespread, outcomes remain deeply unequal. The critical divide now lies in how digital participation is leveraged and rewarded. As access becomes normalized, advantage shifts toward those able to convert visibility into value. Digital inequality thus operates less through exclusion and more through differential capacity for capital conversion, reinforcing existing social hierarchies within the appearance of openness.

The Precarious Creator- Identity as Commodity: The contemporary influencer figure exemplifies what Sarah Banet-Weiser describes as the neoliberal ideal of the entrepreneurial self, where identity itself becomes a marketable asset (Banet-Weiser). In this model, personal values, emotions, and lifestyles are transformed into brand elements that must remain visible, consistent, and appealing. The self is no longer separate from work; it becomes the work. Creativity and authenticity are framed as individual responsibility, masking the structural pressures that demand constant performance.

This mode of labor aligns closely with Guy Standing's concept of the precariat, a class marked by instability, insecurity, and the absence of durable occupational identity (Standing). For digital creators, precarity does not stem from factory closure or contract loss, but from algorithmic volatility and audience attention. Income depends on metrics that remain opaque and unstable, producing chronic uncertainty. The creator must remain relevant, visible, and emotionally engaging to survive.

Within what Marwick terms the attention economy, personal life becomes a continuous source of extractable value (Marwick). Relationships, vulnerabilities, and everyday

experiences are repackaged as content. Emotional expression is no longer private; it becomes a resource subject to market demand. These dynamic collapses the boundary between life and labor, intensifying both exposure and exhaustion.

Understanding the curated self as labor clarifies its political significance. Digital self-presentation is not simply expressive or playful. It operates within neoliberal capitalism as a system of value production that normalizes insecurity while celebrating independence. The promise of freedom conceals a demand for perpetual self-exploitation, sustained through visibility rather than wages.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a comparative qualitative case study design, following Robert Yin's model for contextual and interpretive inquiry, which is particularly suited to examining complex cultural phenomena embedded within everyday practices (Yin). Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the study aims for analytical depth, using case comparison to illuminate structural patterns of meaning, value, and power within digital culture. A critical discourse analysis is applied to two distinct influencer personas in order to examine how identity performance functions as a site of cultural stratification within contemporary platform economies.

The comparative design is central to the study's philosophical orientation. By placing two apparently opposed influencer aesthetics in dialogue, the analysis tests the robustness of the capital conversion framework across divergent modes of digital self-presentation. The objective is not to contrast success versus failure, but to examine whether the mechanisms of distinction, value production, and inequality persist despite differences in tone, style, and claimed authenticity. This approach aligns with a cultural emphasis on uncovering axiological structures that operate beneath surface diversity.

Sophie Shohet (@sophieshohet) was selected as a paradigmatic case of the "quiet luxury" aesthetic due to her sustained engagement with luxury fashion and her explicit narration of its cultural logic. Her content foregrounds restraint, craftsmanship, and refinement, presenting value through subtle distinction rather than overt display. Brittany Broski (@brittany_broski) was selected as a contrasting case because of her performance of "relatable authenticity" and her rise through viral meme culture. Her persona relies on humor, self-deprecation, and emotional immediacy, often positioning itself in opposition to polished influencer norms. Despite these aesthetic differences, both figures operate within the same attention-driven digital economy, making them analytically comparable.

The dataset comprises thirty Instagram posts and five YouTube videos from each creator, published between January and December 2023. This period was selected to capture a stable phase in each influencer's career, allowing analysis of established rather than emergent identity performance. Content selection prioritized high-engagement posts, as these most clearly reflect platform validation and audience recognition. Both cases were analyzed using the same coding framework to ensure methodological consistency and to allow meaningful comparison across divergent content forms.

The critical discourse analysis focused on three interrelated domains. First, visual signifiers of economic capital were examined, including clothing, travel settings, domestic environments, and production quality. Second, textual and paratextual elements were analyzed as indicators of cultural capital, such as Shohet's discourse on heritage, quality, and taste, and Broski's fluency in meme culture, timing, and digital humor. Third, engagement metrics and brand partnerships were analyzed as expressions of social capital and as evidence of its conversion into economic reward. Together, these domains allow for a layered analysis of how value is produced, circulated, and legitimized within the digital

attention economy.
This methodological approach enables a culturally grounded examination of how different forms of capital are performed, accumulated, and converted through digital identity work. By situating influencer practices within broader structures of value and inequality, the study contributes to philosophical debates on culture, labor, and stratification in contemporary digital life.

ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

The Aesthetics of Class – Performing Distinction through "Quiet Luxury" and "Relatability": The case studies demonstrate that seemingly opposed digital aesthetics function in comparable ways as markers of social distinction. Although they appear to occupy different moral and stylistic positions, both "quiet luxury" and "relatable authenticity" rely on sustained aesthetic labor and access to specific forms of capital. These performances are not spontaneous expressions of selfhood; they are structured cultural practices that sort individuals into recognizable hierarchies of value.
In the case of Sophie Shohet, the "quiet luxury" or "old money" aesthetic operates as a highly codified performance of class distinction. Characterized by minimalist silhouettes, muted color palettes, premium fabrics, and the strategic absence of visible branding, this aesthetic aligns closely with what Bourdieu identifies as distinction through restraint rather than display (Bourdieu, *Distinction*). Value is communicated indirectly, through signs that require cultural literacy to decode. Shohet's content consistently frames luxury as a matter of discernment rather than expense, emphasizing craftsmanship, heritage, and quality over novelty or trendiness. As demonstrated in her YouTube discussions of materials such as Loro Piana cashmere, economic capital alone is insufficient. The ability to purchase a costly garment must be accompanied by cultural capital: knowledge of fabric provenance, production standards, and symbolic hierarchy. Class identity is thus performed through informed subtlety, reinforcing exclusivity by appearing effortless.
By contrast, Brittany Broski's "relatable authenticity" aesthetic appears to reject elite refinement, yet it constitutes a different, though equally stratified, form of distinction. Her content relies on chaotic editing, exaggerated facial expression, and self-deprecating humor, creating an impression of spontaneity and emotional immediacy. However, this performance requires advanced digital cultural capital. Broski demonstrates fluency in meme culture, platform-specific comedic timing, and rapidly shifting internet vernaculars. Her viral "Kombucha Girl" moment and subsequent sustained relevance reflect a deep understanding of participatory internet culture. Authenticity here is not the absence of performance, but its successful execution. Cultural authority is earned through wit, timing, and social resonance rather than material refinement.
Despite their aesthetic opposition, both performances establish hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion. Shohet's content privileges viewers who recognize luxury codes, while Broski's rewards those fluent in digital humor and subcultural reference. In each case, cultural competence functions as a gatekeeping mechanism. The distinction lies not in whether hierarchy exists, but in which form of capital is foregrounded.
Together, these cases illustrate that digital aesthetics are never neutral or merely personal. They operate as class-coded systems of meaning that demand specific resources for successful participation. Whether through economic refinement or digital fluency, both forms of self-presentation reproduce social stratification within the digital realm. The platform environment amplifies these distinctions, translating aesthetic performance into visibility, legitimacy, and reward.
The Influencer as Neoliberal Ideal – Circuits of Capital Conversion: The case studies

further demonstrate how aesthetic distinction is transformed into material advantage through structured circuits of capital conversion. These circuits illustrate how digital identity performance functions not only as representation but as an economic process. Within platform economies, cultural competence is systematically translated into visibility, trust, and revenue, producing new forms of elite positioning while intensifying economic stratification.

Sophie Shohet's career offers a clear example of this conversion process. Her sustained display of refined taste and fluency in luxury fashion constitutes a dense form of cultural capital. This expertise generates social capital in the form of an audience that recognizes and trusts her aesthetic authority. That trust is then monetized through partnerships with established luxury brands such as Bottega Veneta and Mulberry, as well as through affiliate marketing systems that directly link audience engagement to financial return. The economic capital produced through these arrangements is subsequently reinvested into higher-end fashion, exclusive travel, and enhanced production quality. This reinvestment further consolidates her cultural authority, allowing the cycle of conversion to continue with increased intensity.

Brittany Broski's trajectory follows a parallel structure, despite its contrasting aesthetic orientation. Her mastery of internet humor, meme circulation, and performative authenticity operates as a form of digital cultural capital. This competence generates a large and highly engaged audience that values her perceived ordinariness and emotional accessibility. Social capital accumulates through repeated interaction, recognition, and algorithmic amplification. This audience trust is then converted into economic capital through brand collaborations with corporations such as Spotify and Google, alongside merchandise sales and subscription-based content. Financial success enables Broski to invest in production infrastructure and strategic content planning, which refines her performance of authenticity and deepens her cultural capital within the digital field.

In both cases, identity functions as an entrepreneurial project, aligning with what Banet-Weiser describes as the neoliberal ideal of the self-as-brand (Banet-Weiser). The platform economy supplies the technical and economic infrastructure that enables this conversion, but it does not distribute rewards evenly. Those who begin with cultural fluency, symbolic credibility, or economic security are better positioned to sustain and scale these circuits. As a result, capital conversion produces feedback loops in which initial advantages are amplified into durable social and economic power. What appears as individual success is thus better understood as structured accumulation within a stratified digital system.

The Psychological Toll – Internalized Stratification and the Authenticity Crisis: The pressure to sustain curated digital performances introduces a distinct and often overlooked axis of stratification: psychological well-being. Beyond economic reward or symbolic recognition, the demand for continuous self-presentation imposes unequal emotional and mental costs. The case studies demonstrate that while this burden is experienced differently, it functions as a shared condition of digital labor under platform capitalism.

In Sophie Shohet's case, psychological strain emerges from the demand to maintain an appearance of effortless refinement. The "quiet luxury" aesthetic depends on seamless coherence and visual perfection, leaving little room for visible disruption or inconsistency. Behind-the-scenes disclosures in podcasts and supplementary content reveal the extensive labor required to produce this illusion, including professional photography, careful styling, and long-term content planning designed to appear spontaneous. This process exemplifies what Goffman describes as the erosion of the boundary between front stage and back stage (Goffman). As the performance becomes continuous, the possibility of withdrawal diminishes, and the self increasingly merges with the brand it sustains.

For Brittany Broski, psychological pressure takes a different but equally intense form

through what may be described as the authenticity paradox. Her digital persona is valued precisely for its perceived sincerity and emotional immediacy. However, as this authenticity becomes commodified, it generates contradictory expectations. She is required to remain relatable while operating within a highly commercial environment. Audience commentary increasingly interrogates the genuineness of her performance as her visibility and financial success grow. The demand to remain "real" under conditions of monetization produces a persistent strain, as any sign of polish or professionalization risks undermining the very value on which her persona depends.

These dynamics constitute what this paper terms internalized stratification. Inequality is not only external and material, but absorbed into the subject through emotional regulation, self-surveillance, and chronic anxiety about legitimacy. The capacity to manage this burden becomes itself a form of privilege. Access to support staff, therapeutic resources, or the option to temporarily disengage from platforms mitigates psychological risk and is unevenly distributed. Those without such resources experience intensified precarity, manifesting as burnout, anxiety, and what popular discourse has described as an influencer existential crisis (Vox).

Digital stratification thus operates simultaneously at economic and psychological levels. While some individuals convert visibility into wealth and security, others bear the emotional costs of performance without comparable reward. The platform economy produces inequality not only through income disparity, but through differential exposure to mental and emotional strain, embedding stratification within the very experience of selfhood.

DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis demonstrates that digital stratification does not depend on any single aesthetic, platform style, or influencer persona. Instead, it operates as a flexible and adaptive system capable of translating different forms of capital into social visibility and economic reward. The "quiet luxury" performed by Sophie Shohet and the "relatable authenticity" performed by Brittany Broski appear ideologically opposed, yet both function within the same structural logic. They represent distinct pathways through a shared architecture of inequality, rather than alternative or resistant models.

At the core of this architecture is a self-reinforcing cycle of distinction and conversion. Aesthetic performance first establishes social differentiation by signaling taste, competence, or authenticity. This distinction is then monetized through platform mechanisms that convert attention into economic value. Financial reward, in turn, intensifies the pressure to sustain and refine the performance, raising both the material stakes and the psychological costs of participation. Economic and psychological stratification thus deepen simultaneously, reinforcing one another over time. What begins as stylistic difference becomes durable inequality.

This cycle is especially difficult to contest because it is framed through narratives of individual agency and choice. The dominant neoliberal discourse presents digital success as the outcome of creativity, effort, or personal authenticity. Structural advantages such as cultural fluency, economic security, or algorithmic visibility are rendered invisible, while failure is individualized. The moral language of self-improvement and entrepreneurship obscures the systemic conditions that enable certain identities to flourish and others to remain marginal.

Digital stratification also differs from earlier forms of inequality in several significant respects. It is more relentless, as the digital front stage never fully closes and the demand for performance remains constant. It is more explicitly quantified, with value measured through followers, engagement metrics, and monetized visibility. Most importantly, it is

more effectively legitimized. The rhetoric of meritocracy and entrepreneurial selfhood transforms inequality into evidence of personal worth, rather than structural positioning.
This study is not without limitations. Its focus on two high-profile cases restricts the scope of generalization, and future research would benefit from examining a wider range of platforms, cultural contexts, and levels of visibility. Further empirical work is also needed to document the psychological consequences of sustained digital performance across different social positions. Nonetheless, the analysis provides a critical framework for understanding how digital identity performance functions as a central mechanism in the production and legitimation of contemporary inequality.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the curated self is a defining social formation of the digital age and a central factor in the experience of a fractured society. Digital identity performance is not a superficial cultural trend, nor merely a reflection of existing inequalities. Through the interlinked mechanisms of aesthetic labor, capital conversion, and psychological stratification, it functions as an active process through which social hierarchy is reproduced, intensified, and morally justified. Inequality is not only displayed on digital platforms; it is continuously generated through them.
The analysis demonstrates that digital self-curation transforms identity into a site of value extraction. What appears as expression or participation is structured as labor, subject to market logic and platform governance. Economic reward, social recognition, and psychological stability become unevenly distributed outcomes of this process. The result is a system in which advantage compounds, while precarity becomes normalized and internalized.
Responses that focus on individual behavior calls to curate less, disconnect, or perform authenticity more responsibly fail to address the structural conditions that sustain this system. Such prescriptions reproduce the neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility, diverting attention from the political and economic arrangements that compel constant self-performance. They risk moralizing individual conduct while leaving intact the mechanisms that convert visibility into value.
Meaningful intervention requires a critical rethinking of the digital public sphere itself. This entails questioning the dominance of the attention economy and the metrics that equate visibility with worth. It calls for alternative platform designs and governance models that privilege collective well-being over competitive self-branding, relational depth over algorithmic amplification, and social solidarity over stratified recognition.
Recognizing the relationship between curated selves and fractured social life is therefore not merely an academic exercise. It is a necessary step toward imagining digital environments that support dignity rather than depletion, participation rather than precarity. Only by addressing the structural foundations of digital identity performance can more equitable and humane forms of digital coexistence become possible.

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